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Politics

Ron DeSantis Signed Five Bills Restricting Trans Rights in Florida

The bills target everything from healthcare to pronoun use to school sports.

BY JAMES FACTORA
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Florida Governor Ron DeSantis rang in the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia by signing yet another stack of anti-trans bills into law.

The governor hosted a press conference in Tampa on Wednesday morning for the signing of the "Let Kids Be Kids" package, consisting of five bills. That includes Senate Bill 254, which imposes harsh restrictions on gender-affirming care for both minors and adults. House Bill 1069 bans trans students from being able to use their correct pronouns and allows anyone in a school district to flag classroom or library material that contains sexual content for potentially permanent removal. HB 1438 bans minors from drag performances with hefty penalties for establishments that might violate its provisions. HB 1521 would ban trans people from using the correct gendered facilities in schools, prisons, or any "public buildings." Last but not least, HB 225 gives the state government control over the Florida High School Athletic Association "to ensure women's sports are protected," which is right-wing code for anti-trans sports bans.

"What we've said in Florida is that we are going to remain a refuge of sanity and a citadel of normalcy and kids should have an upbringing that reflects that," DeSantis, a beacon of normalcy himself, said during the press conference, asserting that other parts of the country and "society as a whole" wish to "take that away from them."

"We're not going to let that happen here in Florida, and today is proof of that," the governor said to raucous applause.

Advocates immediately slammed the so-called Let Kids Be Kids package. In a statement provided to *Them*, Cielo Sunsarae, the executive director and founder of the Queer Trans Project, a Jacksonville-based organization that provides gender-affirming resources to people around the country, said that DeSantis is "directly assaulting our freedom."

Sunsarae added that while the package is framed as "protecting children," it has the potential to affect vast swaths of trans adults as well, particularly SB 254. The bill is a blanket ban on transition-related care for minors, and could even lead to the state removing children from their parents' custody. But it also mandates that only in-person physicians can provide transition-related care, and would establish "onerous new written consent procedures," per the ACLU of Florida.

In addition to the in-person requirement cutting off access to healthcare for trans people who live in more remote areas, Sunsarae noted that "a significant portion of gender-affirming care is currently administered by advanced practitioners," creating a potential "bottleneck effect" that could lead to a shortage of providers for trans adults as well as trans minors.

Sunsarae, who uses he/they pronouns, also added that starting hormone therapy "changed [his] life for the better." "From my very first injection of testosterone levels, my confidence, assertiveness, and a greater sense of self-worth skyrocketed," they said. "My healthcare is the best thing that's happened to me, and all transgender people should be able to receive the best healthcare for them without politicians being in the doctor's office with them."

Joe Saunders, the senior political director of LGBTQ+ advocacy group Equality Florida, also criticized the package, noting that it is part of the largest slate of anti-LGBTQ+ bills in one legislative session in the state's history.

"DeSantis doesn't see freedom as a value worth defending, he sees it as a campaign slogan in his bid for the White House," Saunders said in a statement provided to *Them*. "The nation should be on high alert. We are all Floridians as DeSantis seeks to export this blueprint of authoritarianism to the rest of the country."

DeSantis has all but announced his candidacy for the 2024 presidential election. Multiple inside sources have confirmed to news outlets, including NBC News, that the Florida governor is expected to officially launch his campaign within the next few weeks. Additionally, DeSantis is already accruing endorsements from state-level Republican lawmakers around the country, via the super PAC Never Back Down.

Casey Pick, director of law and policy for the Trevor Project, emphasized the mental health impact of these laws. The organization's research found that 45% of young LGBTQ+ Floridians have seriously considered suicide in the past year, with 16% making an attempt.

"These young people are not inherently prone to suicide, but rather, placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society," Pick said in a statement provided to *Them*. "These anti-LGBTQ laws target the very things that we know can support and uplift LGBTQ young people – such as affirming environments at school and in the community, education about their identities and history, and best-practice healthcare."

The enactment of the bills comes just two days after DeSantis signed a bill into law that imposes harsh restrictions on public higher education. Under SB 266, Florida College System institutions are banned from using funds on DEI programs, and from teaching "identity politics" and "critical race theory."

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